

CHAPTER 3

*Into the HEART
of the HEARTLAND*

LINH

"I will never see my brothers again."

A teacher who loved and respected Linh set up a meeting between us. Linh had been a straight-A student in high school and college, but this year she was discouraged with college. She had been skipping classes and had resigned from many activities, which she had formerly led.

We met at The Mill, a coffeehouse near campus. Linh was tall and thin and wore jeans, a sweatshirt, and a delicate Asian necklace. Like many Vietnamese, she spoke less clearly than she wrote. (This is the opposite of Arabic-speaking people who quickly learn to speak English, but have a hard time with our written language.)

I apologized for scheduling our meeting over her noon hour, but she said that she always skipped lunch anyway, to keep her weight down. I said, "That's a very American thing to do."

She smiled softly. "Vietnamese girls worry about weight all the time."

I thanked her for the gift of her time and asked her how long she had been in this country. She responded, "Five years." Then, without any questions from me, Linh told me about her history. She had five living brothers and one older sister, but only one of her brothers was in Nebraska. One of her brothers had died during the war when her parents were running from soldiers. The other brothers were over twenty-one and not allowed to come to America and her sister had stayed behind with her husband.

Linh was born in a small village far from Saigon. Her dad was a teacher, but because he had helped the Americans, he was sent to reeducation camp and afterward forced to farm. Because of her dad's record, Linh and her siblings weren't allowed to attend the village school. She wanted to study but couldn't afford books.

Linh smiled remembering rice harvest. She was the baby of the family, petted and spoiled. The brothers would carry her to the fields and make a little camp for her. When they could, they would stop and play with her. Her brothers might get mad at her, but no one ever really disciplined her. They would wake up in the night and make sure she was covered with blankets. Shrimp was valuable and caught only to be sold, but her brothers fed her shrimp. Still, it was a hard life, and to demonstrate that point, Linh showed me the scars on her arms from leech bites.

Her second-oldest brother awoke at 4:00 A.M. to help her with math before he left for work. She smiled remembering how he would stay up all night and work the problems so that when she awoke he would know how to do the work. This brother wrote her often, admonishing her to study. He told her he didn't believe in destiny and that in America she could

become whatever she wanted. She pulled his letters out of her backpack to show me. Linh said through her tears that she would obey anything her brothers told her. She looked at me wide-eyed and said, "I will never see my brothers again."

I asked why she came to our country. Linh explained that her dad had been promised a car, a house, and a refrigerator in Nebraska, but at the last minute, her parents didn't want to come. They came only so that she could study. When her parents said good-bye, everyone in their little village cried.

The first thing they noticed here was the snow. Flying into Nebraska, Linh asked her father, "Why is the ground white?" The second thing they observed was our haste. Americans all seemed to be rushing around. Everyone had to be someplace all the time. Linh said, "I wondered if people ever slowed down and talked to each other."

They were taken to an apartment by a man who had served with her father in the army. They couldn't talk to Americans at all and they felt crazy. They never left their apartment and they wanted to go back to Vietnam. In Vietnam, they'd owned nothing, no television or books, and they'd used kerosene lamps. But in Nebraska, they were even more bereft; they didn't know how to turn on lights or use a stove or faucet.

Linh's first day of school, she missed the bus and her dad had to call his friend to give her a ride. Her father said, "You must go to school. You don't want to disappoint us; we came here for you."

Once at school, Linh made friends quickly. Some of the American kids laughed at her accent and clothes, but the teachers loved her. She was bright, hardworking, and focused. In geometry the students who had laughed at her soon wanted to copy her homework. By the end of her first year, she had made

all A's. She said, "American kids have no idea how lucky they are to have good teachers."

Linh chose Vietnamese friends. American girls talked a lot about dating and boys. She said, "If I talked that way in Vietnam, I would be considered a bad girl." She explained that Vietnamese teens are more private and conservative than American teens. She asked me, "Why do Americans rush everything?"

Linh's mother worked the night shift, overtime, and weekends, whenever she could. Linh said, "Mom will sacrifice anything for the family."

Her father was sixty-five and disabled from his years in the camps. He'd tried to work, but he'd fallen down his third day on the job. He stayed home now, bored and wishing his family could go back to their village in Vietnam. He wanted to see his ninety-four-year-old mother before she died.

Linh said, "Dad wakes me at 4:00 A.M. and I study before school. He drives me to classes at the university and to my volunteer job teaching English to Vietnamese elders. He keeps all my awards and grade reports. He framed a picture of me receiving my scholarship award."

Sometimes Linh went to American movies but she closed her eyes during sexy scenes. She had been to parties but never danced or drank alcohol. The family was traditional and Buddhist and her parents didn't want her to date until she had completed college. She'd rebelled a little in junior high and had a boyfriend who was Vietnamese, but more Americanized than she was. They just talked on the phone, but she'd really liked him. Her dad and brother had yelled at her about this and finally she'd told her boyfriend not to call. After that, she'd cried, but she told me, "I am family-oriented and I made the right decision."

Her parents wanted her to be a doctor. Linh was scared of the MCAT and studied eight or nine hours a day to prepare for medical school. After she received her medical degree she hoped to marry and have children. She wanted to be able to finance her parents' retirement in Vietnam.

Now she had a case of acculturation blues. She was not fluent in any language. Her Vietnamese was not perfect, but neither was her English. There were many times when she could not express herself precisely. I suspected that part of her current malaise was she didn't have the language to express all her complex feelings.

She also struggled with identity. She moved between two cultures, selecting only what she needed from American culture, yet having to play by its rules. She was a loyal Vietnamese family member in a world where most of the people she loved were thousands of miles away. She respected her parents, but they were of little help to her in the world in which she found herself. Somehow she had to balance the freedom of America with her responsibilities to family. Sometimes she felt like "hollow bamboo," Asian on the outside, but empty within.

Linh was grateful for her opportunities, perhaps almost too grateful. She was respectful of adults and eager to become who her family wanted her to be. The trick would be to meet their expectations without feeling so much pressure that she was immobilized with anxiety. Depression descended when she sensed she might fail the brother who stayed up all night studying math problems for her or her father who gave up his world to bring her to America.

I suggested that we meet again to talk through the pressures of school. I said, "We can discuss what you want to accept and reject from American and Vietnamese cultures. You will want to build a new life for yourself based on good choices."

WHAT REFUGEES CARRY

We old pioneers dreamed our dreams into the country.

—BETH STREETER ALDRICH

Refugees may arrive penniless but they don't arrive resourceless. They carry their individual attributes, their histories, their families, and their cultures. They bring their human capital, that is, their skills and professional experience. This is a complex situation, however, because it's often impossible to transfer credentials and knowledge.

Refugees possess what Bill Moyers described as "the outsider's impatience, the gritty resolve to storm the barricades and triumph from within." They bring what I'll call newcomer zest, an initial drive to succeed that consists of hope, ambition, and trust. Research suggests that this early zest fades by the second generation and is gone by the third.

Over the course of working with refugees, I have identified twelve individual traits that contribute to success in America. I will discuss these attributes in chapter 10. For now I merely want to note their importance in determining who is able to adjust to America. The more of these attributes a newcomer possesses, the more likely he or she is to succeed. Without a certain number of these attributes, a newcomer is unlikely to make it in America. The attributes of resilience are

1. Future orientation
2. Energy and good health
3. The ability to pay attention
4. Ambition and initiative
5. Verbal expressiveness
6. Positive mental health
7. The ability to calm down
8. Flexibility

9. Intentionality
10. Lovability
11. The ability to love new people
12. Good moral character

Cultural Values

To a certain extent, a culture influences the attributes of its members. It is impossible to separate what is cultural from what is personal. (It is especially difficult to do this if one knows only one or two members of a culture. As one knows many people from a culture it is easier to distinguish between individual and cultural characteristics.) The cultural and personal are as intermingled as coffee and cream. But in every culture, there are people who do and people who do not have these attributes of resilience.

Refugees who come alone are much disadvantaged. Families work together, share resources, and support each other emotionally. Both tradition and circumstance encourage the closeness of immigrant families. Over and over, family is literally what keeps people alive. Some members are housed, fed, and cared for by others. And the caretakers have a sense of purpose because of their responsibilities. In hostile environments there is no greater protection and comfort than the protection of close-knit families. Our word *wretched* comes from the Middle English word *wrecche*, which means "without kin nearby."

Supportive ethnic communities also make a tremendous difference in adjustment. Nothing is as important as friends, not food, shelter, work, or even language. When I asked a man from Sudan what the Kakuma refugees most needed in our town, he said they needed to live near other Sudanese people. He was absolutely right. Newcomers need people from their own culture

to orient them to America. The first family to come has the hardest time. The second family has an easier situation.

Newcomers gravitate toward places where there are others from their homeland. In fact, before we understood the importance of support, our government had a different settlement policy designed to keep local communities from being overwhelmed. Refugees were encouraged to move one family at a time into isolated communities. However, the newcomers were lonely and didn't settle in. After many failed attempts, our government changed its policies and we now encourage refugees to settle near people from their old country.

In traditional cultures, survival was a social achievement not an individual accomplishment. Pleasure and comfort were associated with being with one's tribe and with being home. One of the best places to experience community in America is in an ethnic neighborhood. The streets are lively. Generations mingle freely. People help each other out.

The American pleasure in privacy and independence is strange to many refugees. To them, our autonomy simply feels lonely. Many refugees comment on how empty our public spaces are, and, in fact, the people in those spaces are often refugees. Afghani, Iranian, and Iraqi families are the ones grilling meat and onions in our city parks and sitting on public benches talking to their friends.

The closeness of refugees to their families and communities protects, but sometimes at a cost. The ethnic community can become a feather bed, a little too soft and difficult to climb out of. To really succeed in America, refugees must learn to deal with Americans. The best way is to somehow hold on to the good from the old culture while taking advantage of the new, which is much more difficult in practice than in theory. Linh's

struggles are a good example of the difficulties of combining cultures.

The age-old refugee's dilemma is whether to stay in a small, safe cultural enclave or to leave this secure place and venture into the broader culture. If they stay in an ethnic stockade, they can't really succeed in America, and if they leave, they are risking their connection with the old culture.

People from traditional cultures with no sense of clock time and languages very different from English have a harder time adjusting than do, for example, the Bosnians, many of whom come here from Germany. Older people have a harder time. Also people who are dark-skinned have a harder time. Because of racism, the darker one's skin, the harder it is to assimilate.

An important aspect of refugee culture is its similarity to American culture in terms of work ethic. Newcomers are more likely to succeed if they come from a culture whose values promote high achievement; these values include sacrifice, curiosity, enterprise, and willingness to take risks and initiate activities.

Generalizations and dichotomies are dangerous. Thomas Friedman divides the world into fast cultures and slow cultures. There are great differences between "slow" or traditional cultures. The Somalis, the Vietnamese, and the Peruvians are strikingly different from one another in many ways. Still, there are distinctions that need to be drawn. All traditional cultures share the closeness of family and neighbors. Traditional cultures value interdependence and cooperation, whereas Americans place a high value on individual autonomy. As D. H. Lawrence wrote, "America is the homeland of the pocket not the blood."

Many cultures value children who respect authority and defer to others. Linh was raised in such a culture. African and Latino children are taught to comply with authority and submerge their own needs. Traditional families tend to be big extended families with multiple adults involved in child rearing. The parent-child bond is primary. The goal of marriage isn't happiness, but rather caring for children and aged parents. Status in the family is determined by age and gender. Men are favored.

Western families are more individual-oriented. Americans want to raise independent children who think for themselves. The emphasis is on self-fulfillment and development. Rules are flexible, and status is gained by individual efforts. Families are run more democratically. The primary bond is the couple. Emotions can be expressed more directly, and in general, women have more opportunity.

In traditional cultures roles are well defined. Families are more authoritarian and there is less direct expression of emotion. Suppression of feelings and self-control are often seen as positive. Traditional cultures are fiercely loyal to insiders and wary of outsiders. They both sustain and constrain their members.

The traditional cultures tend to be much more holistic than modern American culture. There is no mind-body split, no sacred-profane split, not even a work-play split. Life isn't chopped up into neat little compartments and intervals. In fact, to succeed in America, refugees must learn to compartmentalize.

TIME

For newcomers from slow cultures, time is a river that flows through their lives. They have no abstract sense of time. Refugees

who have been on sun, seasonal, or Circadian-rhythm time find the change to computer time jarring. One of the first things I teach new arrivals is time management, a very difficult skill to master but one that is essential to success in America. I bring calendars, personal planners, and watches and teach refugees how to make and keep appointments. I tell them, "Americans are very serious about two things—time and money."

Anarchist John Zerzan wrote in the *Utne Reader*, "Time is an invention, a cultural artifact, a formation of culture. It has no existence outside of culture and it is a pretty exact measure of alienation." As I wind the watches and set the alarms, I question whether I am doing the newcomer a favor. Something is gained with schedules, but much is lost. The natural flow of life is broken into units and managed rather than experienced.

Newcomers joke about how we look at our watches to decide when to eat and sleep. From their point of view, it looks like we are slaves to tiny machines that constantly interrupt us and tell us what to do next. They also notice that we are always busy. This seems weird to people who come from cultures where there is much sitting around, visiting, and watching the sunset or children at play. As one woman from Tajikistan said to me, "Americans think it is a sin to do nothing."

Newcomers sense that they are being hurried—to eat, to get in a car or out of an office. A man from Mali said to me, "I have learned that when an American looks at his watch, it means I am taking too much of his time. I had better leave quickly."

Many workers come from parts of the world where, when you are tired, you stop work and rest. You take a nap after lunch, which is provided by the employer. If you feel like tak-

ing a day off, you do it and then work harder the next day. It's a major adjustment to get used to forty-hour-a-week jobs at which one is expected to show up on time, work all day, and take ten-minute bathroom breaks when the employer says that is okay. Discussing work in America, a Spanish man told me, "Americans invented stress. And with globalization, stress will soon be all over the world."

Many refugees are not used to efficient scheduling. They allow time to unfurl, and they enjoy however much time they want with visits, celebrations, and other events. As an Iraqi woman said, "At home if we wanted to go to the doctor, we walked to the doctor's office. If I wanted to visit someone, I just went to visit. I didn't call and ask if they could come over two weeks from Friday at three o'clock."

Daylight saving time is a hard sell. Refugees are amazed that we manipulate time this way. They forget to set clocks forward or backward and often have many frustrating experiences before they get DST down. My friend Bintu missed church her first week in America. As I helped her reset her clocks, she burst into tears of frustration because we made time so hard.

I talked to a woman from El Salvador about a conference over two years away but already set in time and place. She laughed and said, "Forgive me. I am not used to the American custom of giving away time so far in the future. How can we know where we will be in two years and what we will want to be doing?"

LANGUAGE

It takes most people from one to three years to learn social English and five to seven years to learn academic English. At first,

refugees feel like children: vulnerable, dependent, and unable to express themselves. An educated man communicates only via hand signals and a few simple phrases. A doctor cannot ask for a glass of water. A teacher cannot understand her first-grade son's homework. Simple tasks, such as exchanging a pair of shoes or making a dental appointment, are complex without language. The intelligence, personality, and energy of new arrivals are submerged by their lack of English. We Americans just see the tip of the iceberg.

Language is connected to both good judgment and to forming relationships. Humans trust or mistrust others on the basis of nuances, tonal variations, and small contradictions. Without language, we miss metaphors and subtleties. We cannot read between the lines or sense what is not being said. We can't convey character or style. Imagine yourself applying for jobs, negotiating bureaucracies, and making friends with a working vocabulary of one hundred words. "Hi." "Thank you." "Where is the bathroom?" "Good morning." "You're welcome."

English isn't phonetic and has an amazing number of irregular verbs and plural nouns. It's filled with slang, academic jargon, and technical terms. Rules for prepositions and punctuation seem arbitrary. Many words sound alike, such as *writing* and *riding*, *a basement* and *abasement*, or *aunt* and *ant*.

And learning the language isn't enough. Certain people may speak Spanish but have limited understanding of the culture of Cuba. Likewise, one may know about the customs of a culture without being able to speak its language. To really become American, refugees must become both bilingual and bicultural. (See appendix 1 for ideas about how to speak to newcomers who have limited English.)

ACCULTURATION

I fled from despair and now each day

I find despair again and again.

—CARRIE FISCHER AND ALBERT GREENBERG

In their first stage after arrival newcomers briefly experience relief and euphoria. They are here and they are safe.

In the second stage reality sets in. Refugees have lost their routines, their institutions, their language, their families and friends, their homes, their work and incomes. They have lost their traditions, their clothes, pictures, heirlooms, and pets. They are without props in a new and alien environment.

They experience cultural bereavement. The old country may have been a terrible place, but it was home. It was the repository of all their stories, memories, and meanings. Many times newcomers' bodies are in America, but their hearts remain in their homeland.

Ideally, the third stage is the beginning of recovery. Newcomers begin to grasp how America works. In the fourth stage, also ideally, newcomers are bicultural and bilingual. They can choose to participate in many aspects of the culture.

In general, there are four reactions refugees' families have to the new culture—fight it because it is threatening; avoid it because it's overwhelming; assimilate as fast as possible by making all American choices; or tolerate discomfort and confusion while slowly making intentional choices about what to accept and reject. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut published the results of long-term studies on newcomer adaptation in a book called *Legacies*. They found that this last reaction, which they called "selective acculturation," was best for refugees.

They described two other less-adaptive ways of adjusting. Dissonant acculturation is when the kids in the family outstrip the parents. This can undercut parental authority and put the kids at risk. Consonant acculturation is when members of the family all move together toward being American. At one time this rapid acceptance of American ways was considered ideal, but now it appears that this makes families too vulnerable to the downside of America.

In *Legacies*, Portes and Rumbaut report that most immigrants move into the middle-class mainstream in one or two generations. That is the good news. The bad news is that if they don't make it quickly into the middle class, they won't make it at all. With the passage of time, drive diminishes, and by the third generation, assimilation stops. If two generations fail to make it into the middle class, the following generations are likely to be stuck at the bottom.

Failure to succeed will drive refugee families away from mainstream culture into what Portes calls "reactive ethnicity." Newcomers will revert to enclaves and see failure as inevitable, thus, in many cases, dooming their children to fail.

Portes's research obviously has implications for social policy. We need to help refugees and immigrants early with job training, education, language, and business loans. It's hard to study physics when one is sick and hungry, or to attend GED classes when one has worked all night at a factory. If we miss our chance to help them, we miss our chance to create well-adjusted, well-educated citizens.

I will discuss our environment and the ways we do and do not help refugees in the next chapter, but first I want to tell an archetypal success story. The family arrived here badly traumatized after wandering across many countries looking for a home.

But they were a strong family with many attributes of resilience. In Nebraska, their community helped them survive and their hard work enabled them to build a life for themselves. Thirty-seven million people watched the last episode of the TV show *Survivor*. This family's story and the stories of most refugees are much more compelling than any contrived reality-television program could ever show.

KAREEM AND MIRZANA

"I could smell freedom in America."

I interviewed Kareem and Mirzana at their high school. Mirzana was small and blond. Kareem was heartbreakingly handsome, with thick eyebrows and black hair. But he was shy and let his older sister do most of the talking.

Their family had lived in a village in northern Bosnia. Their father was an engineer, and their mother worked in a store. They were a hardworking middle-class family. Mirzana said she and Kareem had an easy life, consisting mainly of school and play. Their grandparents lived nearby. Kareem said, "We had everything we wanted. We were never lonely."

Nearby there was a war in Croatia, but their parents didn't think the war would come to Bosnia. One day the Serbs came and put their father and all the men in their village into a concentration camp. The siblings and their mother fled to Croatia.

Mirzana told me about her father's camp. She said, "Many men were in a small, empty room. They had nothing to eat, no papers, and no money."

Their father developed a lung infection. Still, he was lucky—he was only there for a month and not too badly beaten. He suffered most hearing the pain of others when the soldiers

took them out and beat them. He listened to men scream for hours.

Their father saw many bad things, most of which he didn't tell them. He did tell of a drunk soldier who came into their cell and shouted, "Run to the corner. The last one there will be shot." One man didn't run and was killed by this soldier. Mirzana shook her head sadly as she said, "This man was deaf."

Eventually their father was released. Before he could escape the country, he was ordered to fight the Serbs. He didn't even have a weapon and, as Mirzana put it, "He was there to be shot." After a while, he managed to run away and find his family in Croatia. When he came to their door, none of them recognized him. In the two months he had been away, he'd aged ten years.

The family lived in Croatia for two years. Eventually a friend helped them get into Germany. They spoke no German and lived in one small room, which Kareem didn't like. He said no one could ever be alone and there were fights about space and sharing.

Mirzana and Kareem learned German, but their family couldn't become German citizens and they had no hope of improving their situation. In 1998 the Germans kicked them out and they came to the United States.

They were optimistic on the plane here, but when they arrived in Lincoln they were taken to a small dirty apartment. They were exhausted from the thirty-hour flight, but they couldn't sleep. Their mother was in shock. She cried, "I want to go back." The father said, "You forget, we have no choices. We have no country to return to."

They had no car and they didn't know anyone. No one in the family spoke English. But after five days they moved into

their own apartment and they discovered next door a family that the father had known as a child. The two families cried with joy to be reunited. Now the family knows all of the Bosnian community. Bosnians in Lincoln share meals and throw parties. The men help each other find jobs and the women help each other learn English and shop for bargains.

When I met them, Kareem and Mirzana had been here only three months, but already they were speaking pretty good English, their fourth language. They laughed as they talked about early experiences in Nebraska. A neighbor gave them bananas, but they thought they tasted like soap and threw them away. They missed European bakeries. In America everything supposed to be sweet was salty and vice versa. Here herring was sweet and butter was salty.

Kareem and Mirzana like it here. Mirzana is making A's and, after school, she is a stocker at a supermarket. Mirzana laughed as she explained. "The staff teaches me a new word each day." Kareem is too young to work, so he cleans the house, does laundry, and studies after school. Both Kareem and Mirzana want to go to college and get good jobs. They want to care for their parents.

Their parents are ambitious, too. They have difficult factory jobs because their English is still poor. They work from two until ten. But in the morning they study English. Mirzana said, "In a year or two they will have better jobs."

This family is lucky. They have each other and a supportive community. Everyone has many of the attributes of resilience. The family carries with them a great deal of human capital. The external environment has been pretty harsh, but most likely, they will eventually transcend it.

Sometimes Mirzana wishes that her life these last few years

were just a dream and she would wake up in Bosnia in their old house. Her grandmother would be calling her to come work in the garden. There would be no war. Kareem disagrees. He is filled with newcomer zest. He said, "I could smell freedom in America."

CHAPTER 4

ALL *that* GLITTERS . . .

THE WIZARD OF OZ

Recently I visited friends from Northern Iraq to celebrate their daughter Noora's tenth birthday. They live in an apartment complex run by Lincoln's most notorious slumlord. Shady Acres is a stucco building with six units on the outskirts of town. Just west of the building is a trailer park, infamous for its tornado deaths, and next door to the east is a triple-X dance club featuring a dancer named Anna Mal. As I walked toward my friend's place, I passed an empty unit with its door open. Piles of beer bottles and magazines, trashcan liners filled with old clothes, and unfurled rolls of toilet paper filled the place. I wondered if someone called this unit home.

My friend's place was clean and neat, an oasis of order in this chaotic universe of sleaze. Zena, her husband, and four kids lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Zena greeted me with a big hug and led me into the living room where a small television blared cartoons. I asked about the new baby and Zena said she was sleeping. I asked about her husband, a gentle man hurt in the war, and Zena said he was at an ELL class at the library.